DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 490 CG 031 364

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TITLE When Assessments Fail: Using Alternative Approaches to Career Exploration.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 9p.; In: "Staying Innovative and Change-Focused in the New Economy"; A Collection of Special Papers Generated for the 2001 International Career Development Conference (Seattle, WA, November 7-11, 2001); see CG 031 356.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alternative Assessment; *Career Counseling; *Career Exploration; College Students; Decision Making; Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Internship Programs; Personality Assessment; *Student Personnel Workers

ABSTRACT

Career Assessments are useful in helping people uncover their interests, values, personality, and skills. The problem with assessments occurs when counselors do not use the information to explore options for career decisions with students. This paper offers 10 alternatives to administering Career Assessments, which counselors can immediately implement into their counseling sessions. The suggestions include: (1) volunteer or do an internship in an area of interest; (2) get involved with a career contact program that offers mentors; (3) describe a dream job scenario; (4) complete some field research or informational interviews; (5) read about job descriptions on the Internet; (6) consider hobbies that may have career options; (7) join groups that link students with professionals in a field of interest; (8) use a company directory to generate ideas or interests; (9) learn lessons about resourcefulness, creativity, and persistence; and (10) read books about career decision making. Counselors have to be mindful not to overwhelm students with too many ideas at one time. Coaching will be needed to tell them how the ideas work. (JDM)

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International
Career
Development
Conference
2001

When Assessments Fail: Using Alternative Approaches to Career Exploration

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Career Assessments are useful as they help people to uncover interests, values, personality, and skills identification. Assessments help people to describe and understand themselves in a way that may be new, or more in depth than usual. Assessments often confirm what a person thinks s/he knows, and gives options as well as a place to start towards research on career and educational decision-making. When trying to make a career decision, the career research that is conducted will help students uncover positions that they may want to pursue. It is important for students to discover the things they enjoy doing. If a student is happy in a position, it will most likely lead to happiness in other areas of their lives since jobs and careers take much of our time. When counselors can help a client find out what their "calling" or "niche" is, they have done a great service.

Where assessments fail is really where the counselor fails to come up with other options to use when trying to assist a student in making a career decision. The following are some of the many reasons that a particular client or student may not be open to assessments: they have taken career assessments before and still do not know what they want; they do not believe that taking assessments can work for them and feel that they are unlikely candidates to fit into a category or personality type; assessments are not available or are too costly; and lastly, many assessments deal with job types or positions, where as many students may know more about the industry or region of the country they are interested in. Assessments of course aren't for every student. Certain people do not test well and others will look at results and say, "This does not sound like me."

This paper will go over 10 alternatives to administering Career Assessments, which counselors can implement immediately into their counseling sessions. Also, we will use the word "student" and "client" interchangeably. Remember, you do not want to overwhelm students with offering them all their choices for Career Exploration that are described in this paper, but instead to recommend a few options for each person, depending on what you learn about them during the counseling session and through your initial intake. A detailed intake can be created for all appointments and should ask contact information as well as questions on work experience, educational background, graduation dates, majors, geographic preference, career goals, etc.

An effective counselor will end a session with clear goals on what information you want the client to bring in the next time they visit, for example, "Choose 5 options you are considering and print out 1 job description for each. Call me in one to two weeks to share the information

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and discuss." This gives you as the counselor something to start brainstorming about to help students come up with new ideas. For example if someone is interested in Law, they could work at a Law School, Law Firm, Consulting Firm, Legal Counsel with a company, or in a Non-Profit Organization. Present these ideas to students to get them thinking. Show them some job descriptions and resources. Make copies for them if needed. Clients look to you for guidance, new ideas, confidence, and for someone to hold them accountable.

Below are ideas to implement when counseling students who are making career choices:

1. Volunteer or Do Internships Related To Areas That Spark Your Interests

A diploma alone may not guarantee students a job upon graduation. Hiring managers are seeking employees with relevant experience on their resumes. Students who do internships while they are in school will gain new skills, experience, and career maturity to make them more capable to make a decision. What better way to uncover skills, passions, and obtain an insider view of a company or organization's culture then to work part-time or volunteer a few hours per week. Not only will some experience build a student's resume and make them more marketable later, it is a sure way for the student to establish what they do and do not like.

Students receive the following benefits by doing an internship: the opportunity to apply the concepts they've learned in classes to an actual work setting; clear observation of how the industry operates and what skills are needed; confirmation as to whether or not the position and field matches their interests and career goals; hands on experience with the field they wish to pursue; opportunity of receiving more job offers, making more contacts and/or being hired at a higher salary than those who do not work part-time while in school.

Here at CLU in Thousand Oaks, CA, we begin reaching out to students a month prior to starting school! At CLU we have an online system that Freshman are automatically entered in. Once on campus students register an E-profile (which many faculty make mandatory), and we send them emails on part-time, full-time, and internship opportunities and leads related to their chosen major or interests. This also keeps them aware that Career Services is here to serve them. This E-profile is even built into our Freshman 101 classes, which is a mandatory class for all incoming Freshman. At CLU we take advantage of these captive audiences of Freshman. This alleviates "I did not know we had a Career Center," *which we have all heard.*

2. Mentor or Career Contact Programs

These programs link students up with community members who are working in fields students find interesting. They can conduct informational interviews to learn more about a field first hand. Sometimes these leads even end up becoming an internship or volunteer position although that is not the motive here. One warning on mentor programs: expectations of mentors and mentees often differ which can lead to a program's failure. With all the services career centers offer, mentor programs are the hardest to run effectively and they take more time, planning and staff than most realize.

Although students receive a number of career benefits through participating in career mentorship programs it is often very common to have one half of the participants come through a Mentor

Program saying it was worthwhile, while others feel their mentor did not help. These discrepancies can rest in the expectations of each student and that is why an organized program that has training for both mentors and mentees is crucial, but often lacking. Some of the benefits of these programs in relation to career decision making are: mentorship programs may provide students with the opportunity to learn about a specific job, be introduced to other contacts, become familiar with a particular industry or organization, and discuss social and personal issues that may arise.

3. Imagination or Dream Job Scenario

If you can imagine it, there is someone doing it! Advise clients to imagine 3 jobs that they would "Dream" to have or learn more about. Dream job scenario has the client go back into their past and write out, or share out loud, 3 jobs they previously were interested in but gave up pursuing due to financial barriers, practicality, educational limits or for other reasons. Try to pull interests and passions from this "Dream Job" and uncover why the student changed his/her mind. This is useful information for counselors. Then suggest other careers that revolve around the core components of what drew the student *originally* to this area. For example: if they say they wanted to run a flower shop, you can probe further into their love for flowers, creative expression, running a business and being their own boss. With aspects of each position confirmed, you can then brainstorm new options or areas to explore.

4. Field Research or Informational Interviews

Meeting with people helps you to learn more about careers, advancement, skills, and may even lead you to a job or internship. You can assess if these people really look happy and ask them first hand the things they do and do not like about their job. Students might also ask about types of projects they are working on and professional associations they are members of.

Examples:

- If a student talks to someone who writes copy for a PR department in a company, s/he realizes that you do not have to be in publishing to be a writer.
- If a student talks to someone who is a recruiter for a college, s/he realizes there is more than just corporate outreach there is also marketing and recruiting in a university.
- If the student talks to someone who is an Art Director at a Museum s/he may see that the position is really a management job and not as creative, even though it's in the art field.

Things to Remember:

- Impression is critical, including vocabulary when talking to decision makers.
- Enthusiasm, energy and curious nature draw people.
- Write out questions on position, industry, company, and career ladder.
- Have students set specific outcome goals from their Field Research such as, "In two weeks I want to meet 3 people."

Students can contact people for field research by: knowing the information for which they are seeking and finding the right people to talk to; calling individuals and knowing what to say and how to say it (Coaching can help); trying to make an appointment to meet with the person; Having well thought out questions to ask; knowing how to close the meeting; and finally, documenting outcomes and follow-up procedures.

Following up and thanking the people met is just as important as preparing for the actual meeting. Students can do that by leaving their resume with the person and sending a thank you letter after the meeting has taken place. In addition to a typed or hand-written thank you letter, recommend to clients that they can also email a message right after the interview.

5. Printing Jobs From The Web

With the web giving people so much more access to information on jobs, a client has to be careful not to use the online advertisement as positions to apply for, unless they want lower-level positions, but instead using jobs you see online as maps to the skills and experience needed for any given profession. There is no better way or more detailed information on skills, duties, qualifications, salary ranges and ideas about places to work than from advertisements. It is a sure way to find out about new areas by using keyword searches and then printing the job descriptions to compare with other areas clients are considering. This gives your clients something to work towards and knowledge on what they are lacking.

6. Hobbies Twisted Into Career Options

Some students will not embrace structure, conformity, and process. These students will not find "traditional" jobs interesting. These are also students who will take career assessments and not be interested in anything! One way to get creative is to discuss their hobbies and passions or what they are good at and offer creative ideas to show them other possibilities.

Examples:

- Those who like Music-Work for Music Company, music magazine, or concert promoter
- Those who like Horses-Work as Trainer, at Equestrian Centers, in Breeding, with a Magazine or a Professional Assoc.'s for Jockeys.
- Those who like Crime TV Shows-Careers in Criminal Justice or Non-Profit Organizations, Writer of short stories in crime, E-commerce company devoted to catching criminals, or Call Centers like 911 or call-in Help-lines.
- Those who like Sports-Recreation Centers, Schools, Coaching, Managing Sports related company, other sporting retail stores.

7. Join Associations, Use Membership Directories, Conferences, and Newsletters

Joining groups that link students with others in the field and update them on events and conferences is a great way for them to find out if the field seems suitable. Newsletters give "insider" information in the field and membership directories can be used for further field research or career contacts. Many students are not aware that there are many organizations or clubs to join for every field out there. Eureka, a career related software program lists associations in profiles in the Occupations Database. Once the student has determined which associations they are interested in they can visit the website or call for additional information. Students get a substantial discount to associations so they should take advantage of them.

To get the most out of an association, the student needs to do more than just join. It is important to be active in your local chapter by doing things such as attending meetings, conferences, and workshops as often as possible. These activities will help students to focus more on their career goals or establish some new contacts. Being involved in your association will allow you to network with professionals in your field and may even lead you to the position or internship

you've been looking for. Students need to be informed about "The Hidden Job Market" which are existing openings that are not advertised for. Employers often hire people using referrals, networking contacts, or colleagues to help them find "the right fit." Studies have shown that many jobs are filled before they are ever advertised. In addition, advertising is very costly for employers.

8. Using Company Directory Indexes to Generate Ideas and Interest

Industry indexes are a great way to get a quick overview of places to work. If students are willing to take a more proactive approach to their job search they will decide "where" they want to work as opposed to applying for advertised openings. Company directories will provide students with addresses, phone numbers, website addresses, and sometimes even a description as to what the company is all about. If the company does have a website, encourage students to visit the website of the company they are researching which may spark a new interest. Getting a student excited about a company can help them to hone in on a job target.

For students who have a hard time with position types, you might uncover more by focusing on companies or organizations that interest them. Once they find a few places that they are interested in you can discuss the different departments, and then finally, the types of positions in each department. When looking at types of positions refer to great books like *1500+ Key Words for $100,000+ Jobs* by Wendy Enelow or *The Job Hunter's Word Finder* by John Bluemond. Both publications offer lists of skills and buzz words along with concepts to familiarize a student with a certain position, leading him/her closer to a job target and clarification of career goals.

9. Learning Lessons of Resourcefulness, Persistence, and Creativity

Remind students they need to be "Career Detectives;" any question they have can be answered. Encourage students to visit their school and public libraries and remind students the business librarians are trained to find specific information and they enjoy challenging requests. Librarians can connect students with resources such as basic company information and annual reports, and access to resources. Career questioning can be similar to writing a term paper when you realize there are a few obscure resources that you never knew existed.

Persistence is also crucial. When looking for information you need to be creative in finding what you need. Do not forget that a few phone calls can usually open many avenues of information. Phone books and online yellow pages are also overlooked when trying to find information. No matter what the barrier, persistence can often be a major component to career success.

10. For Those That Read, Read Books With Career Decision Making In Mind

Having students make a conscious effort to think about the world around them in terms of jobs and career ideas is important. Whether reading a book, watching a movie, or just being observant of their surroundings, new ideas can emerge and be followed up on. Remind students that most major bookstores have a career section located in the reference area where they can find many of the same titles that most career centers carry. Encourage students to spend an hour or two in the bookstore researching careers or reading for pleasure and thinking about careers. Hold them accountable for coming back one week later to share and discuss their findings. Make sure to suggest to clients to write information they come across down in a binder created

for their career research. If a client hopes to remember a job s/he read about in a book at the bookstore, s/he runs the risk of forgetting and missing a few ideas to share with a counselor.

One special addition to add to this paper, and for counselors to think about when working with 18-30 year olds, is the effect parents have on career decisions. Parents often directly or indirectly tell or show students what "they" think is an appropriate profession. When helping a student make a career decision a student may not know what *they* really want or like, for they have been "groomed" towards a parent's goal. Even the student may not be fully aware of the messages they received from parents and the immense influence a parent has. It is up to you to ask about this since a student may not see this as interfering. Students may realize with further thought that they are chasing a parent's dream and not their own. This may explain a lack of interest in school subjects and even low grades. A question to probe further into whether this is occurring would be: "What do your parents want you to do?" This can definitely help to see if parental expectations are an issue. In the recent book review issue (Winter 2001) of the *Career Planning and Adult Development Network Journal*, this issue is further discussed in "Hand Me Down Dreams," by Mary Jacobsen.

As you have read in this paper, there are many suggestions to offer to facilitate a career decision. Doing internships, making contacts, talking about a dream job or hobbies, conducting field research, joining associations, analyzing job descriptions, using company directories for ideas, and more. As counselors there is a need to provide more coaching on how all these options work. Script writing and role-playing can be a great way to introduce someone to what is to come leaving little surprise. Finally, make sure you do not overwhelm younger students by giving them too many ideas. Make sure they know the next 3 steps before the session ends even though you may have discussed an overview on the entire process. Encourage students to check back with you through a phone call, email or appointment. Leave your doors open!

Additional Reading List

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